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ABSTRACT

Dropping out of school before high school graduation has re-emerged as a priority issue for professional and public debate and concern. Dropping out of school is viewed as a gradual process as the bond between student and school weakens, representing the final step that occurs after opportunities for intervention at earlier stages have been missed. This conceptual model serves as a framework for development of a comprehensive array of dropout prevention and re-attachment services. Although education agencies cannot provide all the services in the array, the model identifies major program gaps. The model consists of these seven levels: (1) increased equality of social and academic opportunity for all students; (2) supplementary services, including tutoring, assignment of a mentor, access to individualized learning labs, and professional counseling; (3) separate programs for selected students, including prevocational/vocational, job training and part-time employment, cooperative learning, and pregnant girls programs; (4) separate alternative schools emphasizing the uniqueness of students; (5) casework services by trained social caseworkers; (6) awareness and networking by using students who have dropped out in educational programs for reconnecting adults; and (7) flexible, focused programs for dropouts providing small, flexible learning centers. (A chart illustrating this model is included.) (ABL)

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A Model for the Development of Dropout Prevention and Reattachment Services in the Schools

Dropping out of school before high school graduation has re-emerged as a priority issue for professional and public debate and concern. Past waves of concern have left little behind as they receded to make way for new concerns. School systems are once again under pressure to "do something" and most are responding. The resulting services are criticized as band-aid approaches - mere ornaments to show that something is being done. The lack of a conceptual model relating dropout prevention services to one another along a continuum has been a serious impediment to the development of the comprehensive network of services that are needed to serve "at risk" students of different ages and degrees of problem severity.

Simple solutions serve some students well while others fall through the cracks of available services. Dropping out of school is viewed as a gradual process as the bond between student and school weakens. Dropping out represents the final step that occurs after opportunities for intervention at earlier stages have been missed. The root causes are essentially complex and personal.

This presentation offers a conceptual model to serve as a framework for development of a comprehensive array of dropout prevention and reattachment services. Although education agencies cannot practically provide all the services in the array, the model will identify major program gaps so education planners and concerned citizens can proceed in a rational manner as opposed to the random adoption of programs and services.

The publication of a model for development of a continuum of special education services (Reynolds, 1962) opened the door for rapid development in that field. Reynolds' model provided the conceptual framework or scaffolding that modern comprehensive special educations are based on. (See Figure 1). A comparable model is needed in dropout prevention. Below is a first attempt to develop a comprehensive view of the array of services needed in order to provide a net under all students. (See Figure 2). Your comments and responses are needed.

Level 1: Increased equality of social and academic opportunity for all students.

High risk factors are recognized in the very young, often even before they enter school. The self perpetuating cycle of poverty, alienation, and lack of hope repeats itself from generation to generation. These youngsters do not bond to school adequately to start with. Teachers may respond to low achievers by giving fewer response opportunities and initiating fewer contacts in general. (Good and Brophy, 1971, 1978)

Teachers can be trained to be more supportive and motivating and to equalize opportunity among all their students at all grade levels. (Zumwalt, 1986) Two levels of schooling are singled out as needing special attention; the transition between home and school and the transition between self-contained and departmentalized classes.

Much more could be done to enhance school bonding as students enter public school for the first time, yet our concept of the teachers' role prohibits radical change. Children at home are accustomed to highly individualized adult interactions. Educators should meet them where they are psychologically,

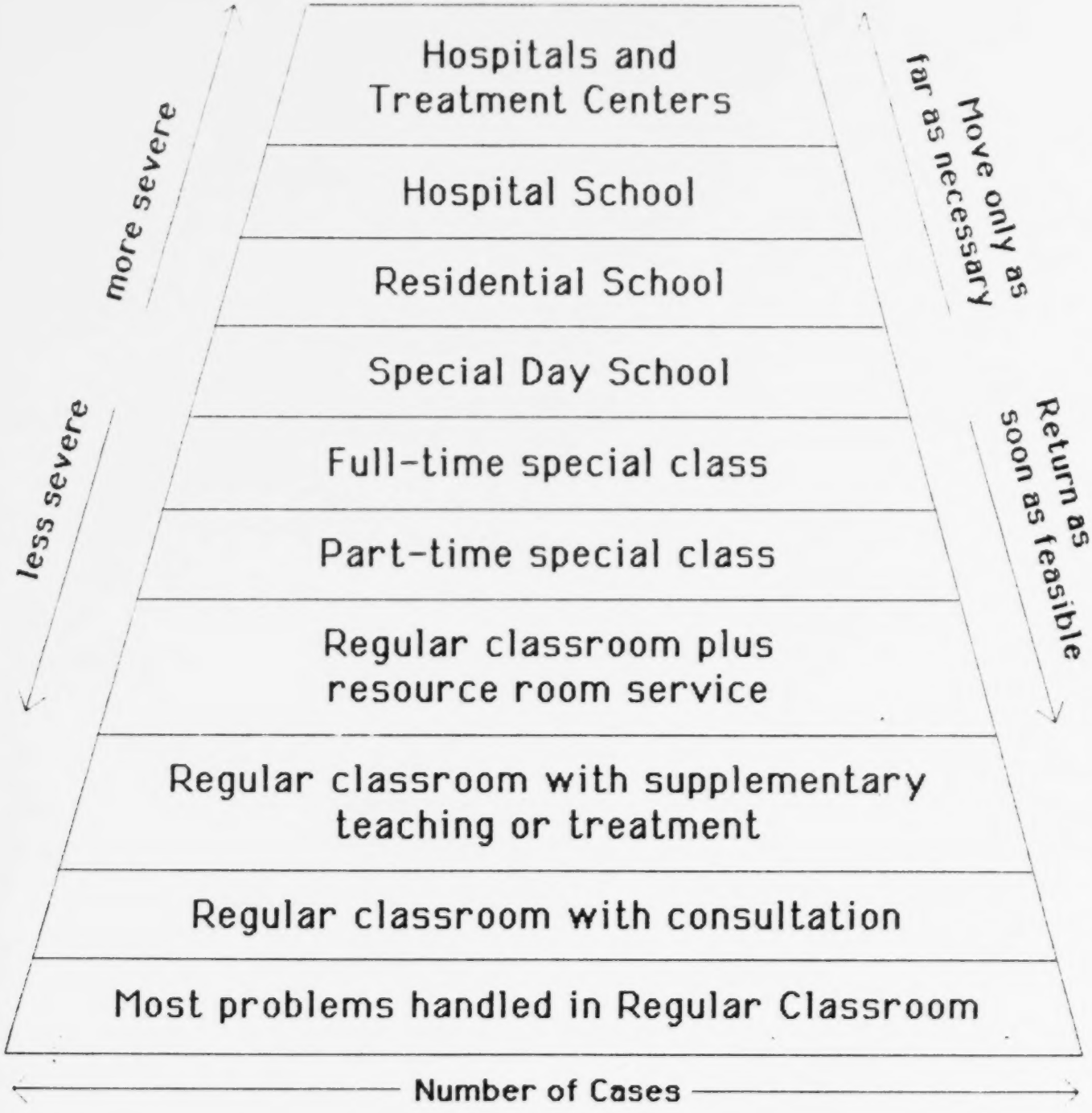

Figure 1. Special Education Programs

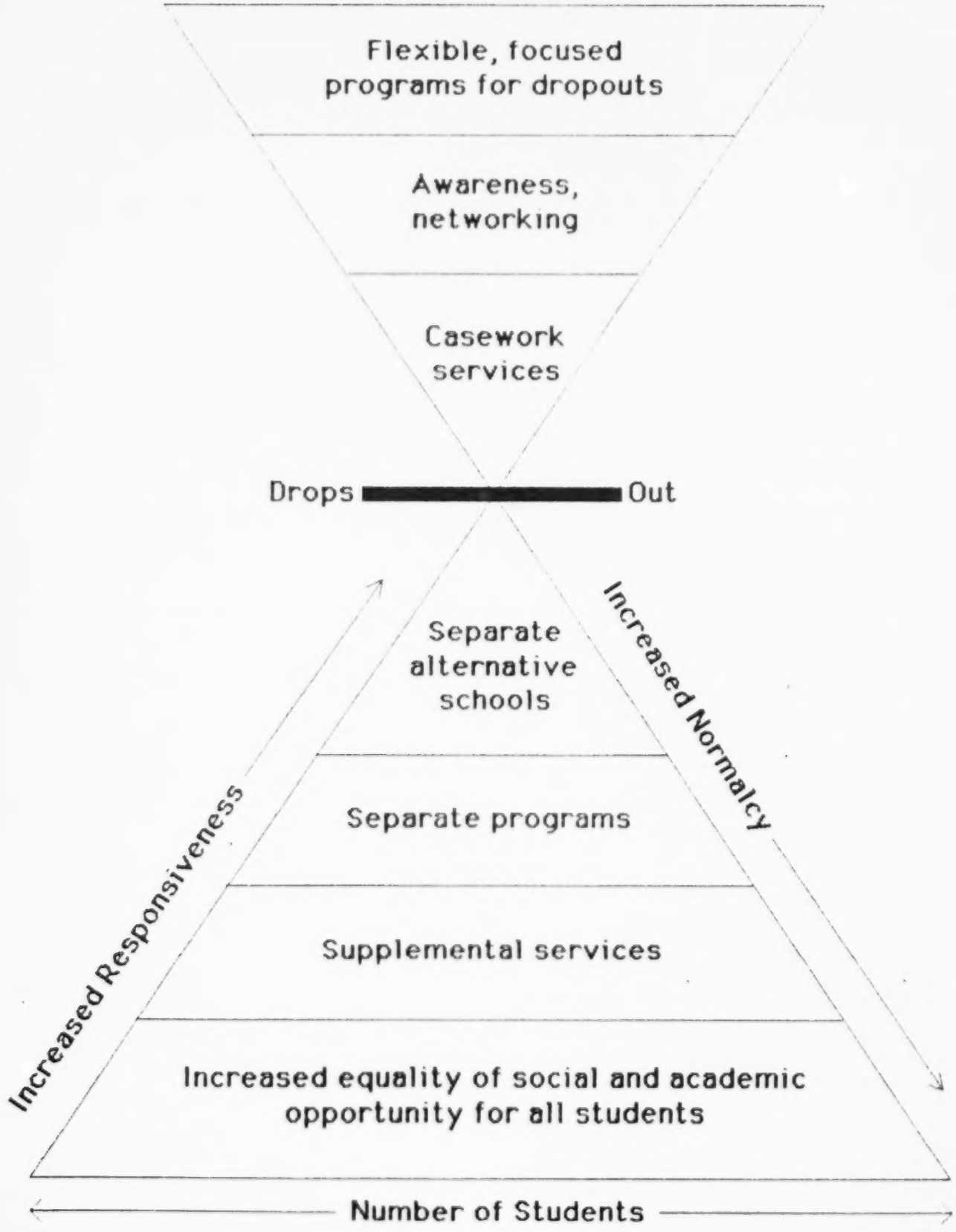

Fig. 2. Continuum of services in Dropout Prevention and Reattachment

fading this interaction mode by slow degrees until the child's skills and expectations are shaped to fit traditional classroom settings. Teachers should meet preschoolers at home to begin forming relationships. The next step would involve one on one interaction at school. Classes should be formed slowly as children are clustered into larger groups.

Students entering Middle School are typically leaving self-contained classes and reporting to several teachers specialized in subject areas. The "self-contained teacher" is a parent surrogate with detailed knowledge of the child and a feeling of responsibility for the students' total well being. Many students never bridge the gap psychologically between the self-contained class and the middle school where there is no apparent primary support system. At about the same time, the student enters the bewildering world of adolescence where the "4th R", relationships, easily surpass the other three in importance.

A specially designed class such as the "advisor-advisee" class (James, 1986) is needed to focus knowledge about and responsibility for the whole child on one teacher who will remain in that relationship with the child from entering the middle school until leaving it. The class would address topics and activities involving self-awareness, values, conflict-resolution, decision making, listening skills, study skills, etc. The main contribution of this program is the guarantee to the student of a caring adult to help him or her succeed.

Level 2: Supplementary Services.

Early warning systems should activate one or a number of readily available services designed for flexible initiation and termination. These should include tutoring, assignment of a mentor, access to individualized learning labs, and professional counseling. Linkages should be provided to social services, jobs, and youth activities. Regular classroom teachers retain responsibility for the student at this level. Delivery of supplementary services in a manner that does not interfere with regular classes needs special attention. There should be no stigma attached to recipients.

"Saturday school" should replace at home or in school suspension to provide teachers with an enforcement tool that does not work against their efforts to keep troubled students in class. Rewards should be provided to selected students for improvement in grades and attendance.

Level 3: Separate programs.

A range of separate classes and services should be available in the regular school to be delivered either separately or in combination to selected students. One end of this range is represented by the student who substitutes a course in applied vocational math for Algebra II while the other end might involve a "school within a school" for another student.

Infusion of prevocational/vocational emphasis at this level helps students see the relevance of schooling to their future lives. Beginning at this level, programs should be characterized by lower student-teacher ratios and teachers who see themselves as working with the whole student versus

merely transmitting knowledge. A shift toward experiential versus abstract learning is another feature at this level and above.

On the job training and part time employment beginning with real jobs at school and extending to part-time afternoon jobs in the community provide an alternative to the "all or none" choice facing students who feel the need to get a job to earn money.

Mathematics and practical English/language arts offer a mix of individualized, small group, and whole class instruction. The emphasis should be on cooperative versus competitive learning. Care must be taken to prevent these courses from becoming dull and mechanically repetitious. These students do not want "baby work" courses. They want to be challenged and stretched in courses that are practical, yet make them think.

Programs for pregnant girls and teenage fathers should prepare them for the practical and psychological problems they face and help them develop productive images of their future lives, including continued education as well as making a living and becoming a parent.

Level 4: Separate alternative schools.

The student-school relationship can become so spoiled by alienation and rejection that nothing short of a fresh start in a radically different setting can offer a reasonable opportunity for change. The reputation of selected students among the teachers becomes as much a factor in the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure as the student and parent's feelings of alienation from the school.

Critical factors at this level include program autnomy, a "family like" atmosphere, and teachers committed to common goals who believe they can be effective with all the students (Wehlage, 1983). Mass production is out - emphasis on the unique student is in. The most effective schools are small in total enrollment (25 to 60 students) as well as class size.

One of the major problems of students at this level of problem severity is the absence of an internalized blueprint for success. Students have lost hope of taking charge of their lives and moving them in desired directions. The remedy is a casework approach culminating in an individual helping plan for each student (Faddis, 1988). One staff member becomes the student's sponsor so that responsibility for success of the whole child is focused. The plan is finalized at a scheduled student staffing that includes the parent and/or student as appropriate. The plan should be positive and worded in terms of specific behaviors.

All the features described in Level 3 apply here with added force.

Level 5: Casework services.

Followup studies of dropouts indicate that at least in the student's perception, nobody at the school cared when the ties between student and school clearly began to unravel and finally break. Even more tragic, about ten percent of "dropouts" were actually kicked out (Hahn, 1987). The author's personal experience is that building principals may approach dropout efforts grudgingly because of a perceived need to "get rid of the bad apples".

Trained social caseworkers should follow up on dropouts on an extended

basis. The caseworker establishes a relationship and serves as liaison between the student and community resources. Students often realize after the fact that dropping out was a mistake but usually are not aware of opportunities or, if aware, may lack the self-confidence essential to corrective action.

Level 6: Awareness and networking.

Schooling was once conceived as the province of the young; something you do before starting adult life. Opportunities for continued education have proliferated in recent years so that virtually everyone is a candidate for some type of program. Getting the word out so that populations most in need are aware of opportunities requires constant effort using a variety of modalities.

The most successful strategy for reconnecting adults to the educational system employs students who are themselves former dropouts who have returned to school. They can exert real influence on family members and friends to follow their example.

Level 7: Flexible, focused programs for dropouts.

Small, flexible learning centers should be conveniently located in communities. The center should be available for anyone who feels the need to further basic education for purposes that range from brushing up on the driver's license test to more general and long-range goals. The staff on regular duty may be just one teacher-coordinator, perhaps supplemented by a

tutor. Computers and a variety of resource material can be used at the center with assistance. Learning materials may also be checked out for home use.

The center also offers classes in basic academics or skills targeted for priority job markets. Child care services at the center are needed by mothers wishing to enroll.

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